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ABSTRACT

The document describes desirable practices for the education of gifted early adolescents in Virginia. It contains recommendations to assist in implementing a comprehensive plan for gifted middle-grade students compatible with state plans for overall middle school education. Research on students this age and on gifted students is cited to support recommendations addressing the following areas: (1) climate--achievement, success, and recognition; (2) organization and structure--specialists, departments, and teams; (3) curriculum--knowledge and skills across the disciplines; (4) curriculum--the expanded core; (5) curriculum--elective, activity, and service; (6) instruction--diversity of instructional needs; (7) instruction--grouping and tracking; (8) instruction--cooperative learning; (9) student services--guidance and counseling; (10) differentiation--articulation and transitions; and (11) looking ahead--career education and college preparation. Includes 27 references. (DB)

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EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS FOR GIFTED STUDENTS IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL GRADES

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EDUCATION IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL GRADES IN VIRGINIA

IMPLICATIONS FOR GIFTED EARLY ADOLESCENTS

This report on the needs of the gifted early adolescent has been developed within the guidelines of the Framework for Education in the Middle School Grades in Virginia published by the Virginia Department of Education. The following statement, from the introduction to that document, provides the structure for this report.

> All students in the middle school grades need to develop performance and problem-solving skills. They need to develop positive attitudes about themselves and others, and toward learning.

Carolyn Callahan (1990), Professor at the University of Virginia, has indicated that middle school educators need "...to emphasize a notion that positive self-concept evolves from a sense of accomplishment and productivity as well as from a knowledge of self." In order to provide the gifted early adolescent with an environment that offers an opportunity for the sense of accomplishment that leads to a positive self-concept, certain elements must be present in the middle school program. A research-based review of possible modifications to provide for these needs is the basis of this report.

This document describes desirable practices for the education of gifted early adolescents. It contains recommendations to assist all school divisions in Virginia in implementing a comprehensive plan for gifted middle grade students compatible with the Framework for Education in the Middle School Grades in Virginia.

A RESPONSIVE PROGRAM

> Education of the gifted...must be seen in its proper perspective as simply an extension of the doctrine of individual differences...The theme of self-realization epitomizes education in a democracy because of the value placed on the individual human being. To the extent that school programs are truly adapted to individual differences, they contribute to the self-realization of each student.
>
> Marvin Gold

As school divisions select ways to meet the needs of gifted learners, the following key questions should be in the minds of school board members, administrators, teachers, students, and parents:

- Will the program provide comprehensive and challenging academic opportunities for gifted learners?
- Will the program recognize the diversity among the gifted?
- Will the program encourage a commitment to lifelong learning and a spirit of inquiry in gifted students?
- To what extent and in what way should the instructional program be differentiated for the gifted?

One way in which educators can determine what is required for gifted middle school learners is by considering the areas of importance in middle school education and analyzing in what ways each area might be differentiated for gifted learners.

Regardless of the administrative structure for the middle grades, the program for middle grade learners should:

- acknowledge that gifted students possess a broad range of abilities and achievement.
- recognize that the unique learning needs of gifted students sometimes set them apart. These needs may be reflected in the kind, depth, breadth, and pace of instruction required to maintain a suitable level of challenge for gifted students.
- acknowledge that gifted students are a diverse group, displaying a variety of interests, styles of learning, and degrees of accomplishment.

CLIMATE: ACHIEVEMENT, SUCCESS, AND RECOGNITION

A positive self-concept for the early adolescent evolves from a sense of accomplishment and productivity as well as from a knowledge of self.

A sense of success for the gifted learner in the middle school grades is fostered through academic challenge.

All students must see a positive correlation between their level of effort and the resulting accomplishments in order to develop a sense of control over their own achievement. Such a sense of control of achievement is necessary for the development of self-esteem.

In order for gifted adolescents to have such a sense of success, they must be challenged appropriately. A challenging instructional program requires gifted students to expend an appropriate amount of effort to achieve. This means that students will relate effort and achievement. When students must relate effort and accomplishment, they gain a sense of control over achievement.

The lack of academic challenge may result in underachievement or perfectionism. Some students who do not find it necessary to expend appropriate effort to achieve may stop expending any effort and cease to achieve. Others may expend effort out of proportion to the task and develop a need for all tasks to be completed perfectly.

The work of researchers such as Joanne Whitmore and Sylvia Rimm provides documentation for this need for an appropriate level of challenge. (Whitmore, 1980; Rimm, 1987) Such challenge leads to positive correlation of effort and accomplishment to provide for development of self-esteem. When effort and achievement are related in a positive way, increased student self-esteem results.

A challenging academic program is important for the academic development of the gifted learner in the middle school grades. A challenging academic program is also linked to the development of a positive self-concept for this early adolescent.

ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE: SPECIALISTS, DEPARTMENTS, AND TEAMS

Instruction for identified gifted students in the middle school grades should be from teachers who have specialized knowledge and skills for developing differentiated instructional plans for the gifted.

Gifted program specialists should participate in the team planning for and the implementation of the differentiated program for gifted learners.

A differentiated program for identified gifted students should make provisions for interaction with intellectual peers.

Teachers who work with identified gifted students should have a desire to work with them. In addition, teachers should have a strong knowledge of the subject matter, display flexibility and creativity, and be comfortable with working as facilitators of learning rather than as disseminators of knowledge.

The gifted program specialist can serve as a valuable resource to teachers or teacher teams involved in differentiated education for the gifted. As an advisor, the specialist may provide additional information about the nature and needs of the gifted students, suggest differentiated strategies and resources, and offer assistance in classroom implementation.

No one organizational plan is required for appropriate instruction for the gifted. Many appropriate organizational plans can be developed:

- Students may receive full-time instruction from a given teacher or team of teachers.
- Students may be clustered on one or more heterogeneous teams.
- Students may be grouped for instructional periods during which a differentiated curriculum is provided.

Other administrative arrangements may be considered. Some examples include:

- multi-grade grouping
- resource programs
- special enrichment
- mentorships
- acceleration

While the general organization of interdisciplinary teams for instruction is recommended as most appropriate for middle school grades, care should be exercised in determining the placement of identified gifted students within the teams. It is important to recognize that gifted students benefit from peer interaction derived from being grouped together for all or part of the school day as well as from interaction with all middle school students.

CURRICULUM: KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES

The curriculum for gifted students in the middle school grades should take them to an understanding of the elements of separate disciplines as well as the interconnectedness of the disciplines.

Interdisciplinary learning should allow for integrated exploration of ideas, issues, and themes.

Gifted students should be provided with the tools and skills necessary for independent research and problem-solving.

The Framework for Education in the Middle School Grades in Virginia suggests ways to help students understand that "much knowledge and many skills span and cross the boundaries of the separate disciplines." Teachers are encouraged to make interdisciplinary connections clear and exciting to young learners. The use of interdisciplinary instruction is very useful for gifted students, since they have unusual abilities to see relationships and analyze structures. As Joyce Van Tassel-Baska indicates in her work on curriculum, interdisciplinary instruction for the gifted maintains a focus on students' "understanding and appreciating systems of knowledge rather than the individual elements of those systems. It reflects a concern for exposing students to key ideas, themes, and principles within and across domains of knowledge so that schemata are internalized, synthesized, and amplified by future examples." (VanTassel-Baska, 1988)

The use of the humanities as a unifying focus for curriculum is a valued way of differentiating curriculum. Strategies for differentiating the curriculum to support interdisciplinary instruction include use of multiple resources, texts, special units, seminars, projects, and the integration of content by key ideas, issues, and themes.

All students in the middle school grades need to develop problem-solving skills. Because gifted students have the ability to handle abstractions, to see relationships, and to engage in divergent, productive thinking to a greater degree than most students, differentiation of the curriculum for gifted learners must continue to place strong emphasis in this area. Infusion of higher order thinking skills into the content areas differentiated by complexity, abstractness, and advanced concepts is crucial for continued challenge to the gifted student in the middle school grades. Thinking skills should enable students to formulate generalizations and theories from their knowledge of facts and concepts.

Gifted learners should also be provided with higher level research skills that provide them with the methodology for the independent pursuit of topics in depth. Inquiry into problems of particular interest to gifted students should be supported through multiple resources, training in advanced research, and mentors who will assist in the process. Models for inquiry enable students to use their thinking skills when organizing their investigations to help them arrive at, express, and evaluate conclusions.

CURRICULUM: THE EXPANDED CORE

Gifted learners may require differentiation in depth, breadth, or pacing within the core courses. Additional course offerings may also be required.

The Framework for Education in the Middle School Grades in Virginia states that all students "should pursue and master an expanded common core curriculum which emphasizes academic and practical achievement, and appropriate social, physical, and emotional growth."

Because gifted students have the ability to learn content more rapidly, and already come to middle school with a wealth of basic information and skills, the core curriculum must be differentiated. One of the ways in which this can be accomplished is by allowing for speeded, compressed, economized versions of the regular curriculum. Research studies show that for some gifted students rapid acceleration is appropriate and, in fact, essential to their continued academic growth.

Another method of differentiation includes compacting or telescoping existing curriculum. This compacting provides additional instructional time to address expanded objectives in the core content areas. Typically regarded as enrichment, these objectives may include additional topics or in-depth exploration of areas of study already in place.

The core curriculum for gifted students may also be differentiated by the addition of new courses. For some gifted students, this expansion may include specialized, advanced mathematics, science, and technological course offerings. It is particularly important that early adolescent gifted girls be encouraged to explore such subjects.

Additional courses in the areas of foreign language and humanities could increase the global perspective of middle grade students. Social studies courses emphasizing the world beyond America and Europe should be considered. Languages such as Japanese and Russian may expand the horizons of gifted students in the middle school grades.

CURRICULUM: ELECTIVE, ACTIVITY, AND SERVICE

Exploratory courses and activities should offer gifted students an opportunity to focus their interests or to broaden their range of experiences. Such courses provide opportunities for students to develop advanced academic and technical skills.

The middle school years are a time of discovery. While young adolescents begin to consider who they are in relation to their peers, the middle school grades should support ongoing opportunities for students to consider possibilities. Courses in fine arts, vocational studies, and academic areas can provide explorations based on student interests and abilities. The use of community resources including mentoring relationships, experiences at museums, parks, and other community facilities, as well as educational programs available after school, on Saturdays, and during the summer can expand educational opportunities outside the school walls.

Gifted students have multiple potentialities. Many of them have interest in a significant number of fields, and the narrowing process remains difficult, even toward adulthood. Gifted youngsters should be encouraged to use elective courses and activities to satisfy some of their interests, and to discover which areas are of particular interest. Some gifted students are highly focused in one area yet have not developed their abilities into specific skills. These students should be encouraged to consider broadening the range of their experiences through electives and activities.

Early adolescents need to learn to use their abilities in constructive, satisfying ways. They need to learn something about their own strengths and limitations, and those of others. Exploratory courses and activities can help them to acquire advanced academic and technical skills, to focus their interests, and to expose them to a variety of idea and possibilities.

INSTRUCTION: DIVERSITY OF INSTRUCTIONAL NEEDS

A gifted program for students in the middle school grades should provide for differences in physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.

A gifted program for students in the middle school grades should recognize the diversity of gifted students.

> Diversity, not uniformity, is the rule rather than the exception at the middle level. Building respect for the core value of diversity should be a prime motivation and consideration in determining the instructional program as well as the governance of the school/classroom and the activities of the middle level school.
>
> (Glenn Maynard, 1986)

A responsive program for gifted students in the middle school grades reflects not only the recognition of their need for academic challenges, but also an understanding of differential development of early adolescents. Physical development and emotional or social maturity may not keep pace with intellectual development during these years.

Gifted students are found in all ethnic groups. They are found at all economic levels. Some gifted students speak English as a second language. Some gifted students are identified as handicapped students. Programs for such students require consideration of the needs of the individual students.

There is no single profile that describes all gifted middle grade students, and no single provision is appropriate for all gifted students. All gifted students do not learn in the same way. All gifted students do not even learn at the same rate. Cognitive growth of gifted middle school students may vary. Students may range from those still thinking from the concrete orientation of childhood to those with the ability to deal in a more abstract realm of thinking. Placement of gifted middle grade students should recognize these differences. Placement in humanities courses should not necessarily be related to placement in mathematics courses unless the student has potential in both areas. Placement in advanced courses with an abstract perspective should occur only when the student is ready for such courses.

Some gifted students are extremely focused and accomplished in a single discipline. Such students may require flexible pacing to encourage them to advance in their areas of strength. Advanced courses, summer courses, and other modifications may be necessary for these students. Some gifted students display a wide range of abilities and interests. Such students require opportunities to explore diverse interests, both in school and outside of the school environment.

INSTRUCTION: GROUPING AND TRACKING

Because of the need for interacting with intellectual peers, gifted students benefit from being grouped for instruction for all or part of the school day.

Gifted students must be offered a differentiated curriculum to foster higher achievement, increased motivation, and improved self-esteem.

In certain instructional settings, the most effective method to provide challenging instruction for gifted students is through instructional grouping. Research studies that include data on identified gifted students indicate that gifted students who are grouped for instruction perform significantly better than those who are not grouped for instruction.

The research on grouping that indicates little or no improvement in achievement has been research that concentrated on general comprehensive grouping plans. In these studies, frequently the researchers concentrating on such plans systematically omitted gifted and special education programs from the research synthesis. In reviewing research on grouping, it is important to note whether the research actually included such special programs.

An analysis of research on instructional grouping of gifted students, including the work of Kulik and Kulik, has been prepared by Susan Allan of Falls Church City Schools. (Allan, 1990) Her conclusions are supported by a synthesis of instructional grouping research prepared by Karen Rogers. (Rogers, 1989) Both reports document the significant positive effects of instructional grouping on the achievement of gifted students.

Instructional grouping should be flexible and appropriate. Such grouping should be supported by a differentiated curriculum. Students should receive differentiated instruction in specific identified areas of giftedness. This would mean that a student who was identified as gifted in mathematics would not be grouped automatically for enrichment in language arts. Placement should be reviewed regularly.

When appropriate instructional grouping is used in combination with appropriate curriculum, research has indicated significant academic gains for gifted students. Such a tool is valuable to improving the achievement of the middle grade gifted learner. Academic achievement relates to the development of the self-concept of the early adolescent gifted learner.

INSTRUCTION: COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Cooperative learning is a valuable instructional tool. In combination with appropriate instructional grouping and curriculum differentiation, it can provide great benefits for the gifted middle grade student in the middle school grades.

Certain applications of cooperative learning principles can be beneficial to the gifted learner. Gifted learners may increase their skills in cooperation and compromise in cooperative groups. Cooperation for problem-solving can be valuable for gifted learners. This is especially true when the team problem-solving environment mirrors the career environment of the research team.

Gifted learners benefit from cooperative learning when real products are produced by the group. If the topic being researched through a cooperative learning mode requires complex thought, the process of explanation may benefit the gifted learner. Gifted students have to understand material more in depth to explain it to others in the cooperative group. This becomes especially relevant if an actual product will result from the efforts of the group.

Teachers should use the cooperative learning technique with care. Gifted students often do not serve as appropriate role models for other students in a cooperative group. Current research studies by John Feldhusen indicate that children model their behavior on the behavior of other children who are of similar ability to themselves and who are succeeding at a given task. (Feldhusen, 1989) The gifted student who quickly attains mastery of a task with little effort does not provide a model for the student who needs to approach a task step by step. The appropriate role model for that student is another student who completes the task successfully through a step by step process.

Teachers using any form of cooperative learning should use care in placing the gifted learner in the role of tutor. Such a role can lead to a sense of intellectual superiority that can quickly diminish the benefit of the social interaction and may lead to the social isolation of the gifted student.

When combined with appropriate instructional grouping, cooperative learning can provide additional dimensions of learning for gifted students. Cooperative learning can be a valuable tool for the intellectual and social development of the gifted student in the middle school grades.

STUDENT SERVICES: GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING

A guidance program for early adolescent gifted students must acknowledge the difference between their stages of social-emotional development and their intellectual maturity.

The middle school years provide time for students to develop positive attitudes about themselves and others. Gifted middle school students are first and foremost early adolescents who experience the developmental stages that all early adolescents encounter. Like all adolescents, gifted students need to become secure cooperating and contributing members of society, and to relate positively with peers and adults.

Because of the differences between their physical and emotional development and their intellectual development, gifted students may require specific types of guidance and counseling support during the middle school years. First, gifted students need to develop appreciation for the similarities and differences between themselves and others. Lack of peer acceptance because gifted students are intellectually different can be especially difficult in the middle school years. This may be particularly true for minority gifted students and for adolescent gifted girls.

Second, gifted students need to learn how to channel their sensitivity. They are extremely perceptive and vulnerable to criticism. Without help in developing coping mechanisms, gifted adolescents may stop taking risks in order to avoid criticism. At the same time, these students may set impossible standards of excellence for themselves and for others. They may become perfectionists. Third, gifted students need support in learning skills to help in social interaction. These students may need help in determining when it is appropriate to work in a competitive mode, when cooperation should be stressed, and when compromise is necessary. Gifted students need to develop an understanding of the positive value of humor so they use humor to help a situation rather than to hurt an individual.

In the 78th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Marshall Sanborn indicates that gifted students need counselors and teachers who are willing and able to recognize and adjust to student strengths and needs. Counselors and teachers should see the curriculum as the strongest potential the school has for meeting guidance needs of gifted students. (Sanborn, 1979) This correlates with the theme of this report that a "...positive self-concept evolves from a sense of accomplishment and productivity as well as from a knowledge of self." (Callahan, 1990)

Additional resources for assisting in guidance for the gifted may be found in Counseling with Gifted Students. This monograph is available from the Guidance Service of the Virginia Department of Education.

DIFFERENTIATION: ARTICULATION AND TRANSITIONS

The intellectual needs and the level of social-emotional maturity of the gifted middle grade student should be considered in providing for curriculum modifications.

The gifted middle grade student may require assistance when difference in curriculum provisions result in differences in school settings.

The middle school years should be a time of smooth transition from the elementary school to the high school. These transitions are sometimes problematic for gifted students. Some gifted students may have participated in accelerated programs and advanced courses that require unique scheduling at the new school. Teachers and counselors should be aware of the differentiated programs provided in the elementary and high schools. Articulation with staff members from other levels should include specific dialogue about the gifted students and their programs.

Because of the academic requirements of the gifted learner, changes from one school setting to another may be common. Students may participate in pull-out programs or may attend another school for advanced courses during a part of the day. The integration of these component parts is needed for both the academic success and the emotional support of the student.

Students may also participate in summer programs, in extended day programs, or in other programs outside of the school setting. The reentry into the school setting is sometimes difficult for gifted students. Support may be required for such reintegration.

Because the nature of the gifted students heightens their perception of the gap in changing groups and environments, the social and emotional needs of the gifted student must be considered with the academic requirements. A balance is required to maintain both intellectual challenge and emotional support and stability.

LOOKING AHEAD: CAREER EDUCATION AND COLLEGE PREPARATION

Career and college guidance for gifted students must begin in the middle school grades.

Career guidance for gifted students should be related to real life positions and problems.

The Framework for Education in the Middle School Grades in Virginia emphasizes the need for middle school students and their parents to look ahead and to prepare for the future. Career education should be infused into the middle school curriculum, and college orientation preparation should begin in the middle school grades.

Gifted students should have many opportunities to experience learning projects related to real life positions and problems. Models and mentors should be available to assist gifted students in considering possibilities for their futures. Adults who are able to help gifted students to explore their potential and future career possibilities can be of great value.

For gifted students, a strong and early emphasis on career education should be provided. Such information is especially important for disadvantaged and minority students. According to the middle school framework document, such "...students, who are under-represented in Virginia's colleges and universities, should receive special encouragement to begin preparing themselves for higher education."

Many gifted youngsters are already considering career possibilities and questioning what academic backgrounds will be required. Guidance for gifted students often requires that information about academic opportunities and career possibilities be provided before such topics occur in the standard guidance sequence. Such early intervention is especially important for minority students and for gifted girls.

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Periodicals:

Gifted Child Quarterly is the official publication of the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) published four times a year. The journal contains articles of interest to professionals. NAGC membership includes the journal. Write to NAGC, 4175 Lovell Road, Box 30, Suite 140, Circle Pines, MN 55014.

Roeper Review is a reference journal that accepts contributions from teachers, counselors, scholars, researchers, and students. The journal focuses on current research and issues relating to the lives and experiences of gifted children. Write Roeper Review, P. O. Box 329, Bloomfield Hills, MI 48013.

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